

Massachusetts Letters About Literature 2016  
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Level III Top Honors Award

Dear Sylvia Plath,

I am sorry I ever doubted your words – I know now the truth that they hold.

During the start of my sophomore year of high school, my reading group in English class chose to read your book, *The Bell Jar*. I felt immediately the intensity held in your prose, and I must admit that I was deterred. Esther's descent into depression was so vividly captured that the pain she felt would leap from the pages and into my gut, where it would fester while I read on. If this sounds like I did not enjoy reading your book, it is because I truthfully did not. I was unnerved by Esther's inability to find purpose and the general malaise that surrounded her. The people that she came into contact with all seemed misunderstanding or cold, causing me to feel a deep sadness for Esther's loneliness in the world. Your words are honest and pierce the veil of comfort, Ms. Plath. At the time, I could not appreciate the candidness and clarity with which you delved into Esther's hazardous life.

In the February of the following year, I had a skiing accident and hit my head. The next day when my head was pounding and I could not focus, I naively assumed that if I had a concussion, it would soon clear itself up. During the following month, I began my unconscious decline. I cried a lot during that time, for every reason and no reason at all. I began to move through life under a haze that permeated every feeling that I had, until all of my thoughts were sticky with tears and the confusion brought on by this wave of sullen emotion that had hit me out of nowhere. There was a glass bell jar lowered over my life, trapping my melancholy thoughts with me and threatening to take my sanity. I became unrecognizable to myself. Once a happy and energetic person, I had become constantly anxious and sapped of energy. I was not aware at the time that I was experiencing depression, just as Esther was unaware of her condition and the stem of her endless troubles. That's the thing about depression; it will slowly creep up on you and start to squeeze the life out of you, milking you bit by bit of your happiness so that it takes you some time to realize that there is a leech feeding on your mind.

Esther's journey with depression culminated with her attempted suicide, while mine was – thankfully – a much easier realization. On my mother's birthday that March, we had a conversation in which we traced the start of my problems – which she had noticed – to that day on the slopes the month before. I went to see a specialist and was diagnosed with a concussion as well as post-concussion syndrome, which has symptoms such as depression and anxiety. My depression was exposed, like turning on a light in a room and finding someone hiding in the dark. From there, I began to put myself back together.

My appreciation of your book largely stems from my understanding of Esther's feelings that I acquired after first reading it. I can sympathize with Esther and grasp how she felt the walls closing in on her and the presence of the bell jar over her head and thoughts. Depression, for me, is not something that can be overcome. It can be calmed, its appetite quelled with little blue pills and constant vigilance. I carry it around deep inside of me, a little seed that cannot be dislodged. The difference is, now I am in control. I decide how I will feel. I kick back the covers and I get up. I open the shades, I go outside, I continue – with scars, just as Esther had, but with a new clarity and strength that we both discovered inside of ourselves when faced with a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. Just as Esther describes it, "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am".

For this and much more, I would like to thank you for your beautiful novel.

Best,

*Sabrina*

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